

## A Work in Progress

*Written by Anonymous*

Disclaimer: This article is written from personal experience and cannot speak on behalf of any other Tabor students.

A quick post-study hall research sesh on mental health and illness can teach you a lot about those close to you, and even help inform you enough to be able to be there for them. Which is why the article is my story, and not a pamphlet about mental health. Take it from me, because I've already done enough research. Since age ten, I spent my free time scouring the web and reading books about the mental health issues that plague people around me. While some of this research was out of pure curiosity, my sixth grade self wanted to find out more about mental illness because I wanted to know what was wrong with me. I looked fine to everyone, a popular overachiever throughout middle school and junior high, but part of me was never satisfied; I felt like I was never as happy as other kids. It never occurred to me that what I was feeling could be a result of mental illness until about six months later. It was then that I realized there was more contributing to my sadness than the death of my grandmother. Upon looking more into her life, I discovered that she battled with depression, and suddenly the threat that my persistent insecurities and sadness could be more than grief was very real. Everyone had told me growing up that I was just like her. I looked like her, shared her shy temperament, and later—as I found out more about her private life—I shared her inability to let people in. For a while I accepted this reality, that I was destined to be just how she was, and I lived in fear and simply played a part in my own life.

When I came to Tabor, I thought it would go away. By escaping the toxic environment I was trapped in, I thought I could forget about the roots and the troubles I had back home. Instead, I found that I could burrow in the comfort of boarding school just as easily. One of the primary symptoms of depression is loss of interest in daily activities and having trouble being motivated to get out of bed in the morning. My freshman year, I found myself getting lost in Netflix movie selections—to a point where I lost contact with my friends and family if I was not with them face to face. Later that year, I started to have more panic attacks. Mental illnesses are said to stem from both environmental and hereditary factors. When I was formally diagnosed with Panic Disorder, I knew that much of my stress was environmental and self-induced. This realization allow me, with practice, to help these attacks and depressive episodes have less of an impact on my life. Now, instead of burying myself in my room whenever I can't bring myself to leave, I keep a packed schedule and make plans with friends that will both distract me from what I'm feeling and will hold me accountable to someone other than myself. This is the most important way that boarding school affects mental health and mental illness. Here we live in dorms, some of us with roommates, and we're scheduled from 8am-10pm with different academic, athletic, and social activities. Not only are we forced out of bed and jostled into the real world, but we are surrounded by friends. Every time I've felt myself slipping into a destructive or anti-social mood, my friends are at my fingertips and can come hang out with me in an instant. The community atmosphere of boarding schools forces students out of isolation, and hold them accountable for their own lives. This lifestyle works for me, because I would do anything to keep up appearances

and not let my internal troubles affect my everyday life. However, others find the constant structure stifling and are anxious due to the lack of connection with their lives outside of Tabor.

The “Tabor bubble” is also an obstacle to mental health that is unique to boarding school. While I have an amazing group of supportive friends who would do anything for me, I still don’t feel comfortable opening up about the full nuances of my mental health to other people here at Tabor—hence the reason why I’ve chosen to write this article anonymously. (Shoutout to Phoebe Mock; I loved your chapel speech, and I wish I could be as brave as you were). There are plenty of students and faculty here who are so quick to help students in need and support students who just need a friend.

Like myself, most of my closer friends who also suffer from mental health issues choose not to open up about it to more than their immediate circle of friends. Even though I can’t speak for their reasons for choosing to keep this information close, I have a few of my own. First, I don’t want people treating me differently. This is an absolutely terrible excuse with very flawed logic, and I will be the first to admit that. Perhaps stemming from self esteem issues, I have an overwhelming need to prove to myself that I can do and achieve the same things as my peers with the setbacks that I have, and without any assistance. This is a truly ignorant on my part, because I know that the resources provided at Tabor are here for a reason and are nothing but helpful. However, it is in my nature never to let myself affect anything I do, but I’m constantly working to change my attitude and learn to accept help. Second, and perhaps more importantly, I am scared. Behind everything else, I’m still the same little ten year old girl, and I am afraid of what the future holds for me. I can choose to accept the fact that I will end up just how my grandmother was, or I can make my own path for myself. Maybe that means staying closed off and not being vulnerable with people about my issues, and maybe I will be better off because of it. But maybe it means missing out on more intimate friendships and relationships. I am not perfect. I am a work in progress; maybe one day I will be brave enough to seek a professional diagnosis for my depressive episodes, but I know myself enough to know that I’m not ready for that. And if that means that for now my life won’t be as happy, so be it.

One piece of advice for everyone at Tabor and other boarding schools is that you owe it to yourself to make your time here the best of your life. Whatever that means for you, be it surrounding yourself with good friends or throwing yourself into academics or athletics, do what makes your time here worthwhile. Take from my story the things that I did wrong, the things that I did right, and how important it is to know yourself and know what works for you. Mental health is just as important and crucial as physical health and deserves just as much attention. We’re so quick to never make allowances for mental health, and by continuing to not give it attention, we’re subconsciously telling ourselves and those we love that it’s not important enough. Instead, just be a friend to however many people you can, and be someone who encourages people to open up and show the world the sides of them that they’re not so proud of.

We go to a school full of people who are works-in-progress, just like ourselves, and it’s time we gave them a little more love.

